

William "Count" Basie

Big Band Leaders

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Designed by Bill Nelson



William Basie was born in Red Bank, New Jersey on August 21, 1904. Both of Bill's parents were amateur musicians and his mother taught him to play the piano as a young child. Initially Bill played drums in his school band, but later switched to the piano. His playing style was strongly influenced by both James P. Johnson and Fats Waller.

Bill began playing professionally in Harlem nightclubs in 1920 and moved to Kansas City in 1924. Initially Bill played the organ in a local movie theater. His first job with an organized band was with a group called the Blue Devils. It was while playing with this band that Bill learned the distinctive Jump Rhythm Style of Jazz that became his trademark.

In 1927 Bill joined the Bennie Moten orchestra and in 1935 after Bennie's death, he became its bandleader. A local radio announcer in Kansas City gave Bill the nickname of Count Basie. He stated afterwards, "We have an Earl (Hines) and a Duke (Ellington), so why not a Count." John Hammond heard Count Basie's group playing on the radio and was so impressed that he helped the band to get its start in Chicago. By 1937, the band had become one of the country's leading jazz bands and had signed a recording contract with Decca Records.

Over the years, Count Basie's band included many gifted artists who later went on to become famous in their own right such as Jimmie Rushing, Lester Young, Billie Holiday, Big Joe Williams, Thad Jones, Walter Page, and Buck Clayton.

The Count Basie Band became the model by which all future combo jazz pianists would be judged. Two of Count Basie's best known hits are One O'Clock Jump and Jumpin' at the Woodside.

Count Basie continued to tour with his band until 1982. He died in Hollywood, Florida on April 26, 1984 and his autobiography, Good Morning Blues was published posthumously in 1985.

Sources:

Encyclopedia Britannica

Encyclopedia Africana

Atlanta Music Group (AMG)